

VZCZCXRO6312
OO RUEHAST RUEHCI RUEHDBU RUEHLH RUEHNEH RUEHPW
DE RUEHBI #0142/01 0911238
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
O R 011238Z APR 09
FM AMCONSUL MUMBAI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 7077
INFO RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 0117
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 0087
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0143
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 0135
RHEHAAA/WHITE HOUSE WASHINGTON DC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHINGTON DC
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI 2263
RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 0154
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 0226
RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW 0099
RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN 0033

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 04 MUMBAI 000142

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KWMN](#) [KDEM](#) [IN](#)
SUBJECT: WOMEN IN INDIA: CHALLENGES FOR GIRLS

REF: A. 05 NEW DELHI 6179
[1](#)B. 06 NEW DELHI 930
[1](#)C. 08 NEW DELHI 654

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[1](#)1. (U) Summary: The challenges for many females in India come long before entering the workforce: female feticide, female infanticide, and high school-drop-out rate all inhibit the creation of a healthy, educated cohort of women in modern India. In Western India, NGOs and state governments are attempting to address these problems in a limited way, and this cable offers a snapshot of these efforts. Interlocutors agreed that India has in place good laws to address sex-selective abortions and other crimes against women, but with lax or no enforcement, and persistent societal views that value boys more than girls, the journey to healthy, productive adulthood remains arduous, if not impossible, for many women. End Summary.

The struggle of infancy

[1](#)2. (U) In India, the first hurdle for many females is simply being born. As Ref A details, India's census figures show that in 1991, the ratio of girls to boys ages zero to six was 945 per 1000 boys, and the situation continued to decline, falling to 927 girls per 1000 boys by 2001. Most experts accredit this decrease in female births to the increased prevalence of sex determination tests (ultrasounds) which can lead to the abortion of female fetuses, despite a law banning the use of these tests enacted in 1996. Dr. A.L. Sharada of Population First, Inc., a Mumbai based NGO, estimates that 900,000 more female fetuses have been aborted than male fetuses per year based upon the population discrepancy seen in the census statistics. Sharada explains that girls are seen by their families as an economic burden, especially in the high costs of marriage - the dowry, wedding, and loss of her income once married. For Hindus, the requirement of having a son to light the parent's funeral pyre also drives the anti-girl-child actions, she said.

[1](#)3. (U) The attitudes leading to female feticide existed before the advent of modern medicine, however, as Indians relied on

traditional methods to surmise the gender of the fetus, Sharada told Confenoffs. For instance, gender was determined by whether the mother carried forward or sideways, whether the mother had extensive morning sickness early in the pregnancy and whether the mother had extensive swelling during her pregnancy. Herbal medicines known to cause miscarriages were often used to terminate an unwanted pregnancy. Modern medical imaging technology, however, has enabled a more reliable determination of sex, and the availability of surgical abortion has made the termination of the pregnancy safer to accomplish, Sharada noted. (Note: Abortion for the health of the mother or in specific limited circumstances has been legal in India since 1971. End Note.)

¶4. (U) The gender disparity statistics cited to combat sex-selective abortions also encompass female infanticide, since the census data groups children ages zero to six in the same figures. UNESCO's Education for All Global Monitoring Report for 2007 found India to have an early childhood mortality of almost 10 percent: 99 out of 1000 children of both sexes die by age five. UNICEF reported in 2006 that India's childhood mortality rate by age five is 76 per thousand. Though much of the childhood mortality rate may be due to health care factors, some is intentional. Sharada played for Congenoffs a short video in which women from Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh described the various methods they had used to kill their unwanted girl children, such as crushing or suffocating them or feeding them tobacco. Professor C.A.K. Yesudian, Head, School of Health Systems Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences told Congenoffs of other less direct methods used, such as leaving a baby out in the rain where it might contract pneumonia then denying medical care. Other scholars have pointed to the use of poisons or starving the girl-child to death as a means of eliminating unwanted girl children.

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WESTERN INDIA EFFORTS TO CURB FEMALE FETICIDE AND INFANTICIDE

¶5. (U) India has taken several measures to reverse the biases against girl children such as eliminating dowry, (the 1961 Dowry Prohibition Act), and making dowry killings a specific crime (Indian Penal Code 304B). Sections 312- 317 of the IPC make it a crime to cause a miscarriage or the death of a newborn, or to abandon a child under twelve. Sharada noted, however, that the practice of demanding dowry continues, as families still cling to their traditions, some arguing that dowry is the only way women are guaranteed a share of their family's assets, as they will not share in inheritance. Using modern medicine to determine the sex of a fetus was made illegal in the 1996 Prenatal Diagnostic Techniques Act, but Sharada says the law is flawed because it requires the medical community to police itself. The law empowers a board comprised mostly of physicians to enforce the law. The law carries a maximum penalty of three years imprisonment or a fine up to 10,000 rupees (200 USD), a cost, she said, that is more than covered by the fee for a single sex-determination test. Sharada said that only one case since the enactment of the law has resulted in incarceration, and the other convictions, approximately 90, resulted only in minor fines.

Madhya Pradesh Programs Address Girl Child

¶6. (U) Recognizing the cultural and social attitudes that drive female feticide and infanticide, the state of Madhya Pradesh (MP) is attempting to address the gender disparity by

providing an economic incentive to offset the financial burden of having girl children. Under an incentive scheme called "Ladli Laxmi" (darling little goddess of wealth), the state promises to pay 2,000 Rupees (40 USD) to parents who register their girls with the program prior to their daughter's first birthday. The program, however, is only available to families with two children or less. Under another scheme called "Kanyadaan," MP offers Rs. 5,000 (USD 100) to families to help alleviate the marriage costs for the parents of a prospective bride.

Changing the Mindset is Key

17. (U) To raise public awareness about the issue, the media attention has sometimes highlighted the cost of these practices on men. Female feticide and infanticide have dramatically reduced the pool of marriageable women, driving families in some parts of Western India to buy brides from other parts of India for their sons, sometimes being duped by unscrupulous marriage brokers in the process, or inducing brothers to share one bride, according to media reports. Sharada told Congenoffs that in Gujarat, one sub-caste of the Patel community, so concerned over the loss of women to help carry on their bloodline, has made a pledge within their community to not abort female fetuses to help preserve the blood line.

18. (U) Population First, however, has taken a completely different tact to address the shortage of women: working through media and education programs to emphasize the value of women. The NGO holds annual awards for movies, advertisers and television shows depicting women in a positive light. (The movie, Chak De, starring Shah Rukh Kahn as the coach of an All-India women's field hockey team, was one of the winners for 2008.) Population First also conducts gender sensitivity training at universities in Mumbai to reduce the risk of those students contributing to the female feticide statistics. Though

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the incidence of female feticide is highest in western Maharashtra, Sharada said that Population First is targeting its programs at university students as selective abortion is highest among the more affluent and highly educated families that have access to medical technology.

EDUCATIONAL HURDLES FOR YOUNG GIRLS

19. (U) The other major hurdle faced by females in India is getting an education. Interlocutors noted that while primary education is universally available, many families see no value in educating their girl children. Estimates of school attendance for boys and girls vary widely. According to the Mahindra Educational Trust (MET), an NGO working to eliminate the educational gap for girls, 10 to 26 million children ages 6 - 14 years are out of school. Interlocutors agree the problem is most severe for girls. Although the Government of India provides free school lunches for children up to age 13, a program initiated in 2001 to encourage parents to send their children to school, the school attendance data for girls is still disheartening. According to the 2001 Indian Department of Education statistics, the median education level for females is two years, in contrast to five years for males, and that almost 40 percent of girls drop out of school in primary school. The reasons behind the poor statistics for girls, according to the data from MET, are primarily family-related: girls are expected to fetch water and firewood and care for smaller children or sick relatives, causing them to miss school. Further, as the

girls mature and must travel further to get to school, the families fear for the safety, according to the MET survey.

MADHYA PRADESH PAYS FOR GIRLS TO STAY IN SCHOOL

¶10. (U) State governments and NGOs recognize this disparity for girls and are working to eliminate the education gap. Madhya Pradesh has included financial incentives in its "Ladli Laxmi" program to stem this precipitous drop out rate for girls: 4,000 Rs. (80 USD) when the girl passes fifth grade; 7,500 Rs. (150 USD) when the girl passes seventh grade; 200 Rs. (4 USD) per month for attending eleventh and twelfth grades, and 18,000 Rupees (260 USD) for completing 12th grade. The program is limited to parents who have no more than two children. Nonetheless, MP's public relations department claims that over 6000 girls have benefited from program. MP Chief Minister Pritviraj Chauhan told the press he believes that these programs had a major role in the BJP's holding on to power in that state's 2008 assembly elections. On March 16, L.K. Advani, the BJP's prime ministerial candidate said he would adopt this scheme nationwide.

NGOs believe female education is key to independence

¶11. (U) MET works in poor urban, remote rural and tribal areas in Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, as well as neighboring states helping 49,000 girls go to, and stay in, school. To foster education for girls, MET works with families to support the education of the girls and provides funding for school uniforms and school supplies. It works with teachers, encouraging them to advocate for the education of girls. So far, the NGO reports only a 10 percent drop out rate among its participants, compared to the national average of 40 percent for girls in primary school.

¶12. (U) Helping to ensure education for girls, an orphanage for Muslim girls located in Mahim, a Muslim slum area in Mumbai, insists that its charges complete schooling or have viable

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employment skills before they get married. Miriam Batliwala, director of the program at D.M. Jaliwala Orphanage Trust which operates under the name WECAN (Women's Empowerment Center and Network) said that she is determined to break the cycle of poverty she sees in Mahim and other poor Muslim areas of the city. Batliwala said she sees that often poor Muslim girls are married off at age 15 or 16, and are then divorced by their husbands at 21, left with no viable job skills and inadequate education. Batliwala said that this insistence on education, however, has made fundraising difficult for her organization; Muslim businessmen have told her she is making the women less desirable as wives by insisting on education.

¶13. (U) Education is pivotal for ending the exploitation of girls. Another NGO, St. Catherine's, a shelter for girls rescued from prostitution, told Congenoffs that most of the rescued girls, minors and adults, are illiterate when they enter St. Catherine's. Without education, these girls often wind up as maids or nannies, or, more likely, return to prostitution. Focusing on the importance of education, however, St. Catherine's aims to break the cycle of poverty. The NGO reports that some women who completed their program have become nurses, teachers and computer specialists.

¶14. (SBU) Comment: Though President Patil, India's first female president, claimed in her talk in December 2008, in Yavatmal, Maharashtra, "Today, our women are competing on an equal footing with men," the reality for many in western India belies this claim. The government programs in Madhya Pradesh, at least, accepts the view that girl children are a burden on the family, rather than working to change the mindset that devalues women. Ensuring more girls complete their education may in the long run, however, be more persuasive and thus more effective in breaking the cycle of atrocities that stem from devaluing the girl-child. While government and civil society organizations are trying to make inroads, sex-selection abortions, female infanticide, and denial of education for girls still persist. The next census, scheduled for 2011, will indicate whether these programs have succeeded.

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